

THE LEARNING STRENGTHS PROJECT

by Diana Browning Wright

The learning strengths project was developed to assist students with learning disabilities. It attempts to address the link between behavior problems motivated by protest and escape when a student has a history of lack of school success. The reasoning behind this project's approach is as follows:

I can't accept an accommodation/modification if I don't know and accept the reason I need it. I can't be a self-advocate, asking for appropriate accommodations, if I haven't accepted that I need them. I can't effectively use any adaptation if I haven't eliminated "Global Deficit Belief System" thinking---(i.e., the erroneous idea that the REAL reason why the student needs special education services is because he/she is dumb!)

Don't you get it, teachers: "I'd rather act up than show you I'm stupid!"

THE BEHAVIORAL LINK: ADDRESSING PROTEST AND ESCAPE BEHAVIORS LINKED TO LACK OF SCHOOL SUCCESS

Four steps are utilized to increase students' task completion rates and decrease behavior problems for high school and middle school students receiving special education services. These may be adapted for younger students. (*Refer to: The Mind That is Mine for Younger Students*)

- I. The Learning Strengths Seminars**
(4 times per year, all students with learning disabilities participate)
- II. The Learning Strengths Portfolio & Classroom Follow-up**
(Ongoing dialogues and record keeping throughout the year)
- III. The Learning Strengths Conference**
(A one on one conference with a staff person to demystify the disability)
- IV. Ownership Demonstration: Asking For and Analyzing Accommodations/ Modifications**
(Systematic training on how to ask a teacher to accommodate the learners' characteristics)

I. Nuts and Bolts on Instituting Learning Strengths Seminars & Classroom Follow-up at Middle School/High School

- 1. Get buy-in from administration and the faculty for Learning Strengths Seminars to demystify learning disorders**

Suggested language:

"By assisting students in understanding their learning profile, we reduce their belief that they are deficit in all areas. When they believe they can succeed in school and in life in spite of the learning difficulties that have resulted in special education services, students strive for higher achievement. Demystifying the learning disability reduces anxiety on the meaning of their difficulties. This can result in students trying to achieve higher outcomes." This process can occur through a seminar format with in-class and individual conference follow-up with special education staff.

2. **Identify all students who receive special education services, and all service providers who will be participating. Assure high-status admired teachers/administrators will also attend at times.**

Language sample:

“When students know all of us—from teacher to bank president to mechanic have profiles of strengths and weaknesses, it reduces their fears of examining their own profile. Hearing peers and admired teachers reflect on their learning profiles in a safe environment with interesting, fun activities is an important step in achieving self-determination and self-advocacy skills.”

3. **Determine whether pre and post measures will be utilized**

Measuring effects on academic performance may be the most powerful pre/post measure. Reduction in task refusals or an increase in task completion might augment the longer-range academic outcome measurement. Self-esteem enhancement is harder to quantify, but has been observed to be a real outcome of this program.

4. **Develop lesson plans that will describe the profiles of strengths and weaknesses of a variety of learners. (See references)**

Consider guest speakers such as young adults with learning disorders/differences or successful community members to augment your presentations. The Learning Disabilities Association often has guest speakers which can be tapped. The actual lesson plans are readily available through www.allkindsofminds.org and other sources. (See references)

5. **Identify a minimum of one day per quarter (thus a minimum of 4 sessions per year) to conduct the seminar portion of this four-part intervention. Continuously remind all teachers in the school as to the purpose of the Learning Seminars.**

This is especially important the week before you begin. (Remember: some students will of necessity miss a general education class in order to schedule all students into a seminar.) Offer to provide previews of the lessons in some manner so teachers are aware of the content and potentially powerful effects of this intervention.

Sample language:

“We will be discussing developmental functions and the variability that occurs for all of us in how we learn. The seven major functions are: attention, memory, language, motor, social skills, simultaneous and sequential processing, and higher order cognition. How these functions synchronize and interplay to lead to successful learning will be addressed. We plan to teach our students about these functions, identifying strengths, and weaknesses, so that students do not believe they have global deficits, but rather that they have specific functions which serve

them well, and specific functions which cause them difficulties learning. This is step one in a four part process we will be utilizing to incur a belief in their capacity to achieve high standards with effective, minimal accommodations. Lesson plans will be on display in the faculty room next week, as well as a chart describing the process and outcomes from the students' and from the staff's perspectives at the conclusion of each seminar quarterly. We welcome staff participants as well should you wish to drop by during your free period. "

6. **Inform all students with IEPs and their parents (consider: students with 504 plans may also benefit from inclusion in the seminars) about the purpose of the seminars.**

Scheduling variables: Assign each student to a period during the seminar day(s). Develop a brief oral and written description of the Learning Seminar contents and distribute. (Consider offering a special session for interested parents.)

7. **One to two days before the day of the seminar, inform teachers again that this will be an excused absence from their class.**
8. **Distribute passes and reminders to teachers the morning of the seminar so that students who "forget" are promptly rerouted to the seminar location.**

Emphasis with teachers that students who "forget" should be privately informed of their responsibility to go to the seminar location. Typically, following the first session students will have had a good time and will be anxious to come to the seminar promptly on subsequent dates.

9. **Conduct the session. Consider providing refreshments.**

By providing refreshments the student perceives that this is not "business as usual."- Rather, the message becomes, we are "celebrating our individual strengths and differences." This is in contrast to the students' expectations that the focus will be on "identifying our problems". A subtle difference with profoundly different implications is conveyed.

10. **At the conclusion of each session, assign follow-up activities which will be completed in the RSP or SDC classrooms for each student, related to the presentation. These assignments will be included in the Learning Seminar Portfolio.**

For example, if attention and motor skills were addressed, the students might complete the Attention Cockpit (see references) and analyze the effects of hand fatigue following a lesson in a classroom, utilizing a survey form.

II. Learning Strengths Seminar: Portfolios Component

The relevance of the Learning Seminars for each student is enhanced when an opportunity to reflect on the material individually is provided, and when possible, when one-on-one private dialogue with the teacher occurs. This can result in further understanding and acceptance of learning differences. The goal is to increase the student's reflection on why learning is hampered or enhanced by his/her current task approach skills and the teacher's current instruction process. The Learning Seminar Portfolio might include a variety of reflections on developmental functions as they apply to the student, analysis sheets following a test in which the student analyzes what went right, what went wrong, and plans his/her process for the next test. The Learning Seminar Portfolio also provides the student evidence of what accommodations/modifications might be helpful and why. This process is closely linked to training the student how to ask for accommodations appropriately.

Language sample:

"When we meet to talk about what you learned during the seminars, I will be asking you to honestly reflect on your own profile of strengths and weaknesses, and I will be sharing some of my own profile, as well as some profiles of people I know and some of my friends that I have been thinking about since we started this project. The more we understand what we are good at, and the challenges we face, the better we can plan on how to use that to our advantage. Every one of us can succeed beyond our wildest dreams if we believe we can, AND if we strategize using this information. We will not only will we use what we learn in the seminars. Later, you will have an opportunity to meet privately with myself, or XXX the school psychologist, or XXX to review your actual test findings that show your strengths and challenges. Every one of us in here will have a scheduled appointment. So think about it: What do you REALLY want to know about your talents, and about the challenges or hurdles you have? You are going to have a chance to privately go over all those "tests" you have taken, and hear, maybe again, or maybe for the first time, how that really can be either turned to your advantage, or overcome. Our goal this year is to really understand ourselves, and use that information to succeed in school."

III. The Learning Strengths Conferences: A One to One Demystification Process

1. Establish an atmosphere of respect, freedom from humiliation and "unconditional positive regard" for all students prior to initiating these steps. This process may be done by a teacher, clinician, school psychologist, school counselor, speech/language pathologist, or any other professional with assessment and intervention design skills participating in the project. Refer to Levine, Mel. (1994) Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Problems at Home and At School Educators Publishing Service: Cambridge, Mass.
2. Meet privately with the student, following the following demystification steps. (*See attached appendix to this article*)

IV. Ownership Demonstration: Asking For and Analyzing My Accommodations/Modifications

1. Teach curricular adaptations to students

- Introduce the concept of “accommodations vs modifications” using the grid of nine curricular accommodations (attached), and the hierarchy of selecting least restrictive curricular adaptations. Link to standards and review standards for the students’ courses.
- In groups, review case studies of hypothetical students who require accommodations. Have students identify the least restrictive adaptation(s).
- Have students privately review which accommodations/modifications they are receiving in their classes AND which would likely facilitate further success (if any). Have students link accommodations/modifications to their individual learning profiles following the demystification meetings. Add this analysis to their Learning Seminar Portfolio.
- Conference with students about their analysis, validating and/or altering their perceptions of what facilitates/inhibits their success.

2. Teach asking for an accommodation/modification

- Role play approaching a teacher in large/small group
- Practice approaching a teacher, using staff who have volunteered to participate if at all possible
- Practice what to do if the teacher says “no”
Although you will set up the initial scenario for students to practice asking for an accommodation so that success is assured practice for a ‘no’ response is essential. For example, practice the script, “*Oh, I must have misunderstood. I’ll take that back to my IEP team.*”
- Plan a date and time to approach one of their current teachers
- Approach the selected teachers and inform them of the importance of an appropriate supportive, affirmative response when the student makes the approach
- Prompt the students to fulfill their missions!
- Celebrate with a party once all have completed the assignment; use peer support for those students who are having difficulty initiating.
- Reinforce each teacher who participated (e.g., note of thanks, with attached cookie)